East London: Food Chronicles

Canon
EOS
4000D

The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.

Dorothea Lange

About the Project

East London: Food Chronicles is an exploration of East London's diverse food cultures, delving into the vibrant communities, migration, and the environment that shape their stories. The project also highlights the challenges many face in today's world, including economic hardships, social crises, and environmental issues, while celebrating the diverse heritage each community brings to the table. Through this lens, food becomes more than just sustenance—it becomes a means of connection, reflection, and understanding, highlighting how food culture is deeply intertwined with the struggles and triumphs of East London's people.

The Birth of the Project: From Workshops to Fusion

The idea for this project first took shape through a workshop I ran with Dr. Elaine Swan as part of the University of Sussex's Food Lives project. It was during this workshop that community feedback helped shape the project's direction. We realised that food is not only a way to bring people together, but it can also highlight deeper societal issues such as migration, heritage, and the shared struggles we all face. Inspired by these insights and the feedback from the community, we set out to create a project that would use food as a lens to explore and celebrate East London's communities—past, present, and future.

Exploring Stories: Workshops, Locations, and Collaborations

As the project evolved, it was shaped by a series of workshops and visits to various locations across East London. We explored community food gardens, went on historical photo walks, and created a map of the area's rich cultural history. Each session provided an opportunity for participants to share their own stories, engage with the community in meaningful ways, and have fun.

One memorable moment occurred during the oral history session, when Sham brought her Sorta (Bengali nutcracker). The Sorta became a powerful object for celebrating heritage and sharing personal stories. It was through this object that Sham connected her family's migration story from Bangladesh to East London, and it sparked deeper reflections on how food-related objects carry cultural significance and memories across generations.

Skills Gained and Project Shaping

Throughout the workshops, participants gained valuable skills in photography, curation, and storytelling. They helped shape the project by contributing their creative ideas, whether through creating the magazine, participating in the map-making project (where Shahena invited participants to send images of East London), or sharing their stories for the exhibition. The project became a true collaboration, with the community influencing its direction at every stage, ensuring that the voices of East London's people were reflected in every aspect of the work.

Pierre, Founder of Mindful Photo Lab

East London: Food Chronicles

Exploring the Richness of Our Communities

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Eid Celebrations

Sugar Feast at Aziziye Mosque & Bengali Street Food in Whitechapel

5kg home made Turkish baklava for Eid - Cansin

Sugar Feast at Aziziye Mosque

A Celebration with the Turkish Community

Shade of Blue - Carron

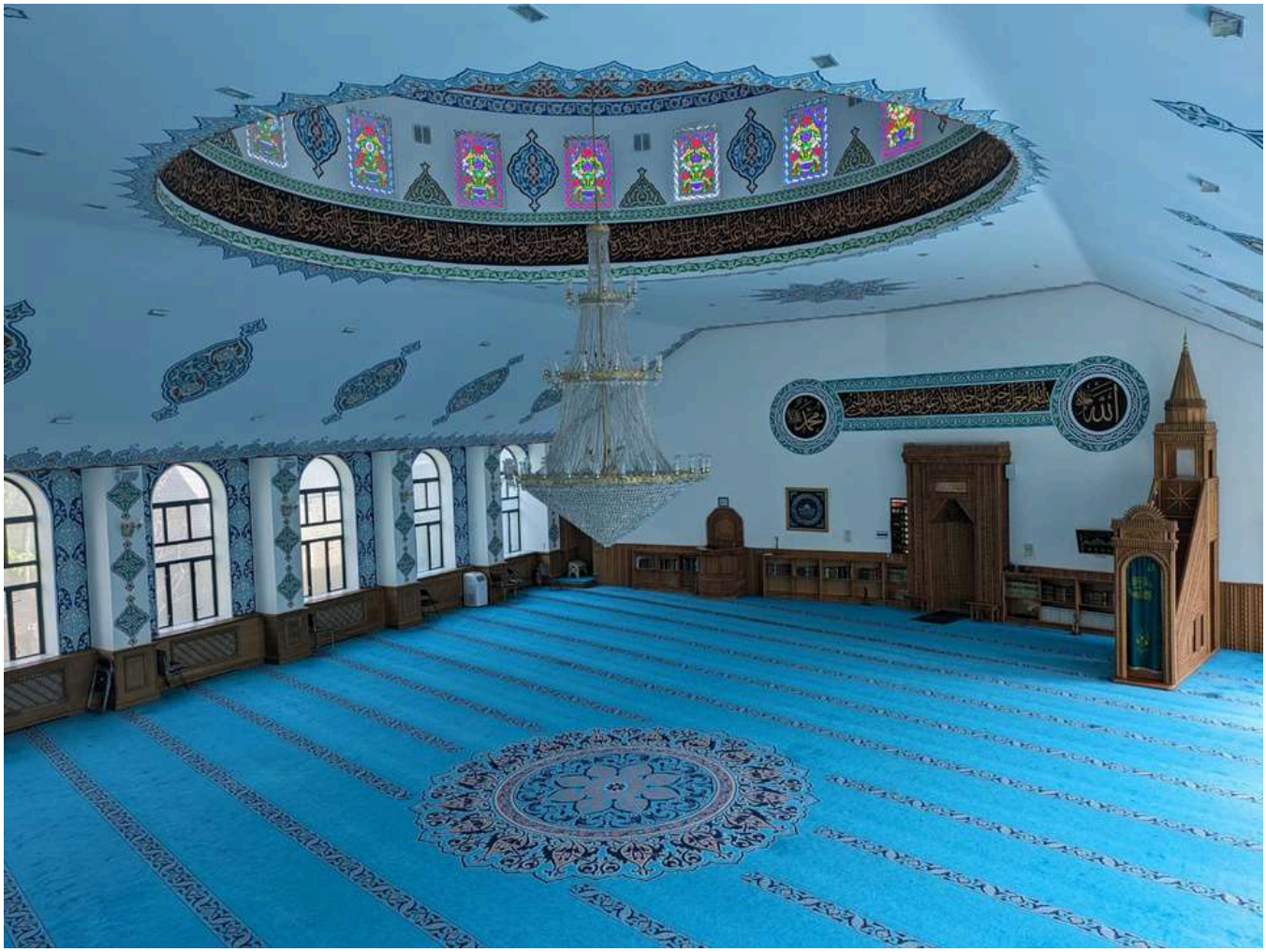
The project began during the Eid celebrations, a time of reflection and joy for the Muslim Turkish community in Stoke Newington, a vibrant area known for its significant Turkish population. Many Turkish families settled here after migrating in the 1970s, bringing with them rich cultural traditions, including the practice of Şeker Bayramı (Turkish Sugar Feast), which is celebrated at the end of Ramadan.

Sylvie Belbouab guided us to Aziziye Mosque, providing a unique opportunity for many participants, most of whom were not Muslim, to step inside and explore the mosque's cultural and spiritual significance. The visit was particularly special as Cansin, freshly returned from her native Turkey, shared insights into Şeker Bayramı. We were fortunate enough to taste baklava, a delicious Turkish treat.

A portrait of Sylvie against Turkish tiles – Rose

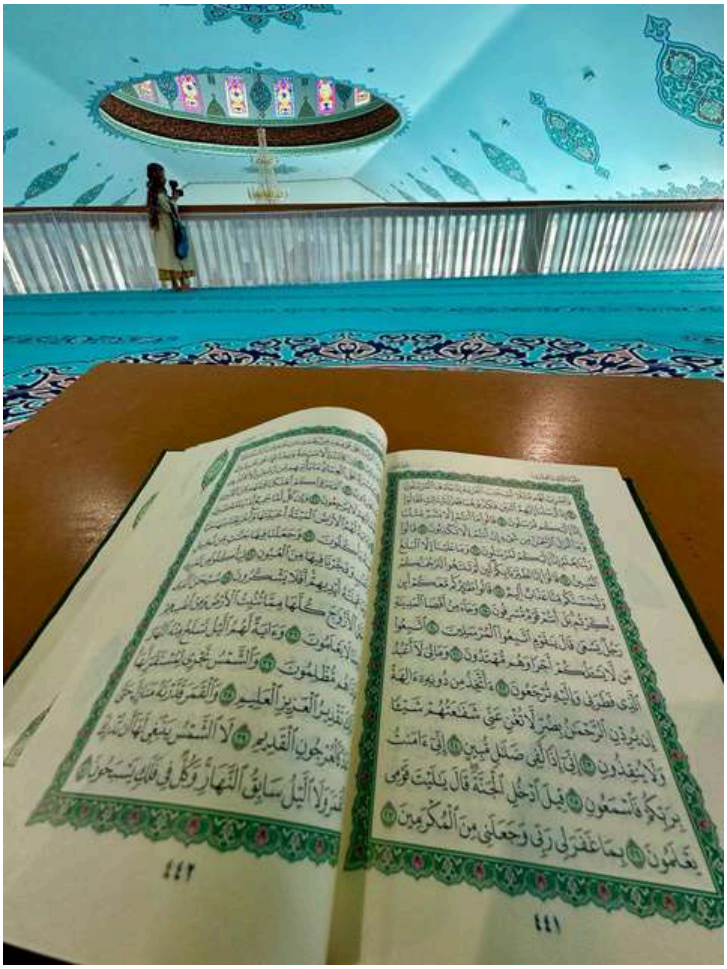
Photographer Sylvie Belbouab, a Muslim woman with over 20 years in East London, captures events, portraits, and activities of diverse women. Through her work with charities and community centres, she offers photography workshops that help people use the medium to express themselves and improve well-being.

Taking off your shoes to preserve the cleanness of the place and respect its sacrality - Anna



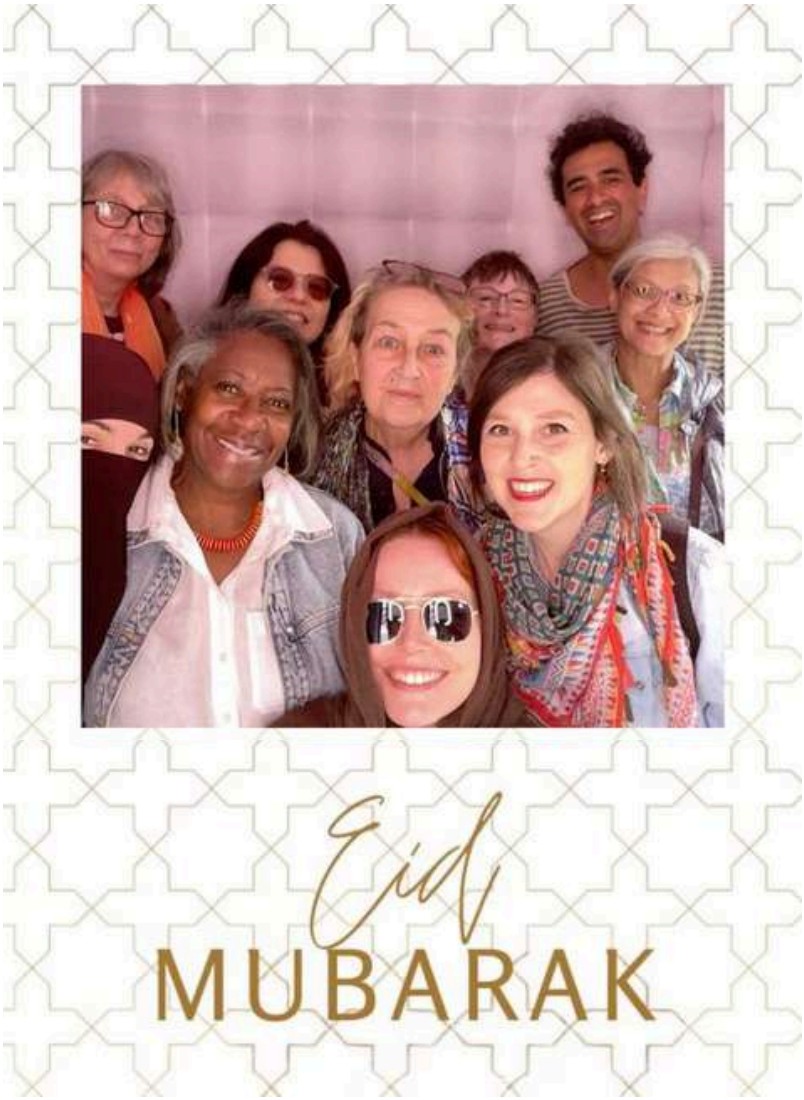
View from above - Victoria

Faith



You can learn something everyday - Rose

Hanging colourful prayer beads - Nina



Henna session at Ridley Road Market - Sarah M.

East London Mosque

From Storytelling Circles to Celebrations

Storytelling circle at East London Mosque – Pierre

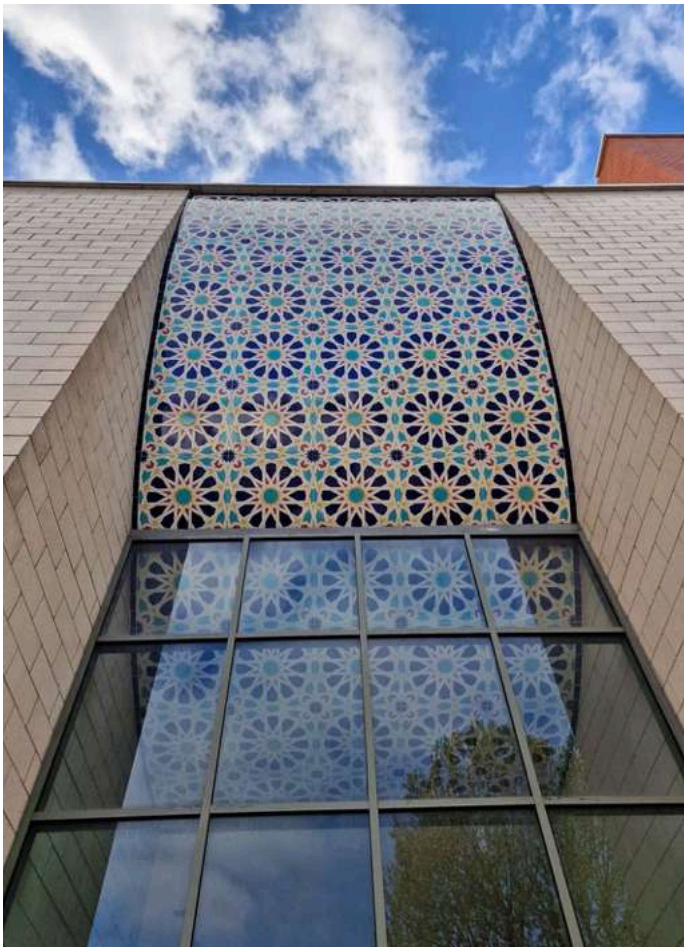
During our visit to the East London Mosque, one of the largest mosques in Western Europe, we saw the bee hives on the mosque's grounds, highlighting the symbolic importance of honey in Islam. Honey is mentioned in the Quran for its healing properties and is considered a divine gift, with the Prophet Muhammad recommending it for its medicinal benefits. The mosque serves as a key cultural and religious hub for the Muslim community in Tower Hamlets, an area with a rich history of migration.

Whitechapel has a long and complex history shaped by patterns of immigration, embracing Jewish, German, Irish, East European, and Bengali Muslim populations. Over the years, these communities have contributed to the area's vibrant and diverse identity, making Whitechapel a crossroads of cultures. Its residents have played a significant role in shaping the multicultural fabric of East London.

Through storytelling circles, participants were invited to share their stories.

Carron reflected on cooking fish the Jamaican way—describing the smells, sounds, and visuals that reminded her of home. We also met a bride from the local community, capturing her photo as part of our effort to connect with the people of the area and celebrate its vibrant heritage.

Honey in Islam: Revered for its healing properties, honey symbolizes purity and is celebrated in Islamic tradition as a divine gift - Pierre



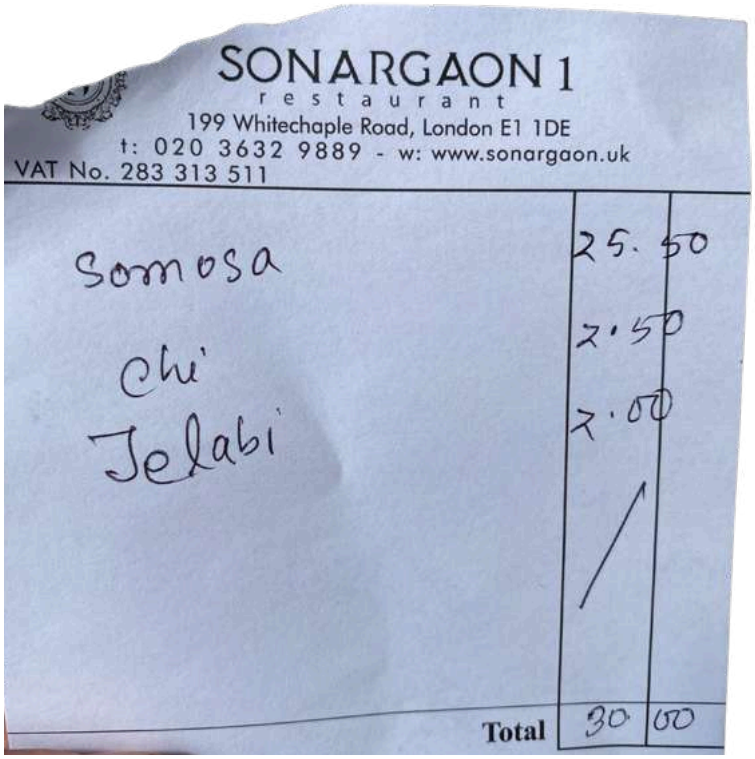
Heavenly skies on entering the Mosque - Carol

Portrait of a Bride - Charu

Love you too! - Eileen

THE EAST LONDON MOSQUE
EAST LONDON MOSQUE
solidarity
تضامن
مع غزة
with gaza

Each Tuesday, a group of women meet for activities at Praxis, a charity in Bethnal Green that supports migrants. Some of the women volunteer to cook for the group during the session so that everyone can share a meal afterwards.
We ran a photo workshop for the women where they created a pretend community restaurant, learning digital skills and sharing their personal stories while celebrating their heritage.
Here, Charity is cooking for the group, showcasing her own rich food traditions.



SONARGAON 1
restaurant
199 Whitechaple Road, London E1 1DE
t: 020 3632 9889 - w: www.sonargaon.uk
VAT No. 283 313 511

Somosa	2	5.50
Chi	2	.50
Jelabi	2	.00
		/
Total	30	00

Exploring Markets: A Sensory Community Journey

Mangos - Sham

Ridley Road Market - Pierre

Ridley Road Market

After our visit to Aziziye Mosque, where we explored the role of food in faith and culture, we walked over to Ridley Road Market, a place deeply rooted in East London's migration history. Originally a bustling market in the 1880s on Kingsland High Street, it moved to its current location after a tramline was installed. Over the years, the market has become a vibrant crossroads for communities from all over the world, with waves of Turkish, Jewish, Asian, African, and Caribbean migrants shaping its unique character.

We were greeted by the unmistakable sounds and smells of the market, and soon found ourselves trying a delicious round, vegetable-based snack—falafel—perfectly paired with hummus. This simple but flavourful dish speaks to the market's rich culinary heritage and the ways in which food brings communities together across generations.

However, the market's future has been threatened by gentrification. In recent years, the developers at Rainbow Properties proposed a redevelopment of the Ridley Road Shopping Village, which could have severely impacted the market's foot traffic and the livelihood of its traders. Thanks to the Save Ridley Road campaign, led by community members and traders, the redevelopment plans were stopped. This campaign, supported by Hackney Council, worked tirelessly to preserve the market's legacy, and the building was listed as an Asset of Community Value.

Despite the victory, Ridley Road Market continues to face the challenges of rising rents and the pressure to adapt to a changing neighbourhood. Yet, it remains a vital part of East London's community, providing a space for cultural exchange, connection, and a true taste of the world through food.

George at Ridley Road Market. So dapper! – Rose

A Ghanaian food stall selling large, deep-fried fish - Chiho

A woman buying fish at Ridley Road Market – Rose

Visiting Ridley Road always takes me back to my childhood in Ethiopia, filled with vibrant colours and warmth - Pierre

Shopkeeper cooking Jalebi – Rose

Whitechapel Market

After visiting the East London Mosque, we made our way to Whitechapel Market to try some street food. We explored both Bengali and Indian dishes and were lucky enough to have Charu with us, who could speak Hindi with some of the shopkeepers. We sampled a variety of meals, took photos of the market, and especially enjoyed Jalebi—a sweet, deep-fried dessert soaked in syrup, popular in Indian and Bengali cuisine. It goes by many names, including jilapi, zelepi, jilebi, jilipi, zulbia, jerry, mushabak, z'labia, or zalabia.

Whitechapel Market was the first market in the United Kingdom to aim to recycle all the waste it generates in 2008, an ambitious initiative designed to improve its environmental footprint.

Selling fresh produce, exotic vegetables, spices, fashion, and cultural wear, Whitechapel Market retains a local feel, much like Watney Market. Despite its proximity to busy roads and large markets like Petticoat Lane and Spitalfields, it maintains a unique charm.

Over the years, the market has been a significant space for immigrants—first serving Jewish communities in the 19th century and later becoming a hub for the Bengali community from the 1970s onwards.

My favourite fishmonger who makes every customer feel special - Carron

Jalebi - Kay

Watney Market: A Taste of Bengali Heritage

As we walked between the stalls of Watney Market, Sham, who comes from a Bengali heritage, shared insights about the vibrant produce on display, including lemons from Bangladesh. These lemons are different from the ones you find in the UK—smaller, with a sharper, tangy flavour and much less juice. They're typically eaten in pieces and often used in curries, salads, or served as part of a meal. Sham also introduced us to a variety of fruits commonly found in Bangladesh, like jackfruit and pomegranate, which are staples in many Bengali kitchens.

While Watney Market may not be as famous as Whitechapel Market, there's a warmth here that sets it apart. The shopkeepers, many of whom have been part of the community for years, are incredibly friendly and open, offering a welcoming atmosphere that feels more intimate and personal. It's easy to feel at home, chatting with the vendors about the ingredients they sell and the stories they carry.

During our visit, we also discussed some of the challenges that families face when buying Bengali products, which can be significantly more expensive than what you find in mainstream supermarkets. Shahena, one of the participants, shared how some families choose to prioritise food spending, valuing the quality and cultural connection of the produce over the cost.

Our trip ended with a coffee at Watney Caffe Italia, run by a family of Bengali Italians who had previously lived in Italy before settling in the UK. This café beautifully embodies the fusion of cultures, showing how migration moves between different countries, bringing new flavours and traditions along the way.

Photo: Shopkeeper at Watney Market - Sylvie

Our volunteer, Sham, shared her knowledge of her Bengali heritage

Bangladeshi lemon (lembu – top & bottom right): very fragrant and not as juicy as yellow lemons. Commonly eaten raw with meals or added to salads. Bitter gourd (Kerala – top left) - Sham

Pierre holding Bengali cucumbers and coconut - Carol

Pierre has been running Mindful Photography workshops since 2019, blending mindfulness meditation with creative expression. After recovering from mental health challenges, he founded the Mindful Photo Lab to help others improve their well-being through photography. Based in East London, Pierre's workshops focus on community, self-expression, and mindfulness, empowering participants to connect with their surroundings and themselves

Bitter gourd (Kerela)– Alla

Shopkeeper - Michelle

Jhinga (ridge gourd), Korolla (bitter gourd), and green chillies – Kaniz Z.

This Bengali supermarket offers a large variety of food. Some of the many fishes on sell are really big - Anna

Carol and Alla holding Bengali lemon and cucumber - Pierre

Betel nut chewing is a traditional practice in many South Asian cultures, where betel nut and other ingredients are wrapped in a betel leaf and chewed for its stimulating effects.

The participants having a break at Watney Caffe Italia, a fusion of Bengali, Italian, and British influences.

Photos: Pierre

PEOPLE

Mark, my local shopkeeper at Roman Road Square Market – Richard

Exploring More Markets

Shopkeeper at Broadway Market – Caroline

Chocolate testing on Brick Lane – Chris

I tend to think of the act of photographing, generally speaking, as an adventure. My favourite thing is to go where I've never been.

Diane Airbus

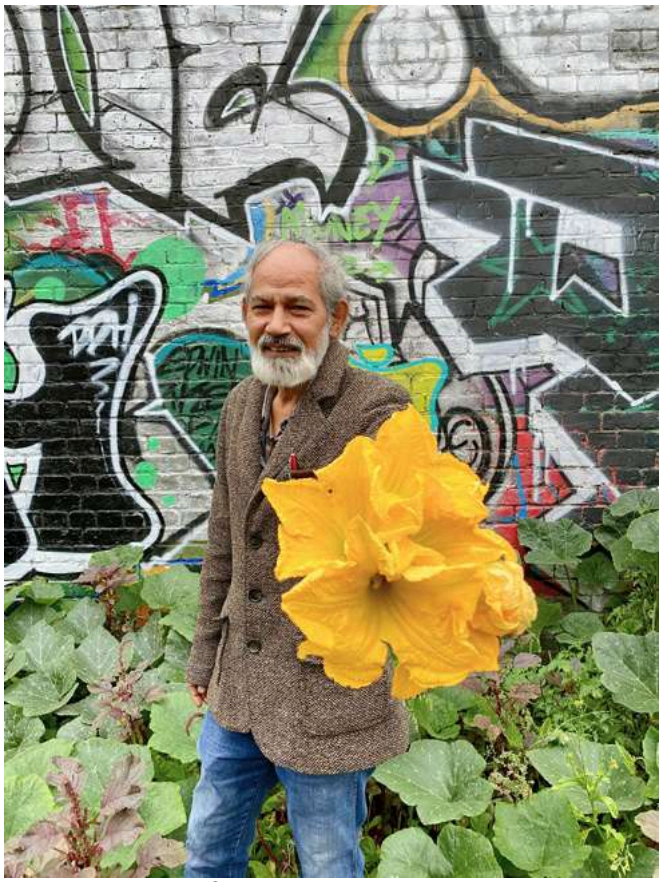
TURKISH COMMUNITY
ABNEY PARK CEMETERY
STOKE NEWINGTON
DALSTON
AZILIYE CAMI
MOSQUE/RESTAURANT/BUTCHERS
REGENTS CANAL
1650's JEWISH
SODA BREAD
1700's IRISH
1570's FRENCH HUGUENOTS (WEAVERS)
CARAWAY SEEDS
OXTAIL SOUP
PICKLED
BRICK LANE
SANDY'S ROW SYNAGOGUE
1950's BENGALIS
CHURCH
SYNAGOGUE
MOSQUE
BRITAINS FIRST & BEST BEIGEL SHOP EST. 1853
BIN
CRANBROOK COMMUNITY GARDEN
WATNEY MARKET
MAGIC CORN
KERELA
GOURD
BENGALI COMMUNITY
SOMALIAN
LIMEHOUSE
PARATHA
SHADWELL
MUSEUM OF IMMIGRATION DIVERSITY
19 PRINCELET STREET
TOWER HAMLETS ARCHIVE
LOST CHINA TOWN
CHINESE RESTAURANT
ENGLISH & CHINESE GRILL
MINDFUL PHO

EAST
LONDON
FOOD
CHRONICLES
made possible with
Heritage Fund
{MAP}
CARIBBEAN & AFRICAN COMMUNITIES
HACKNEY MARSHES
I CAN'T PAINT LIKE UNCOOL JOHN
RIDLEY RD MARKET
CHINESE PAGODA
VICTORIA PARK
PAVILION
VICTORIA PARK MARKET
ICONE FATHER
NAL GREEN MARKET
FRESH BAZAAR
Original fried chicken
BOW
KELLY
FOREST GATE
PANI PURI
ST DUNSTAN CHURCH
ROMAN ROAD MARKET
COCKNEY CULTURE
PIE & MASH!
PANI PURI ?
PUSHKA ??
PUSHKA?
GOLGAPPA
GREENSTREET
TOWER HAMLETS
INDIAN COMMUNITY
CEMETERY PARK
GEORGE
BOW FOOD BANK
poplar union
LINCOLN E3
I LOVE THIS PLACE
Shakena Begum, 2024
TO LIB

Roisin and Hashim having dinner at home in Peabody Buildings, Whitechapel in 2022 as they await the arrival of their first child.
Roisin is a third generation Irish Londoner who has grown up and still lives in the East End. Hashim was born in Mogadishu, Somalia and came to the UK as a refugee.
Their marriage blends religion, language and culture. Both striving and achieving higher education and employment goals than their parents.

- Eileen

The Power of Community Food Gardens



Raman growing food on Regent's Canal - Pierre

Lady in Red - Michelle

We visited several community food gardens, peaceful green spaces often tucked away in the heart of the city, where local people can grow their own food.
These gardens are often hidden gems, unknown to many, but they offer much more than just a place to plant. They provide an opportunity to learn about sustainability, connect with nature, and celebrate heritage through food.
Beyond their ecological benefits, these gardens are also spaces where people grow food, engage in outdoor activities, and improve their wellbeing
These gardens foster a sense of community, connection, and pride, making them invaluable assets in urban areas.

Experimenting with sweet potatoes – Rose

The slugs showing their love for Lincoln Garden – Michelle

Lincoln Community Garden

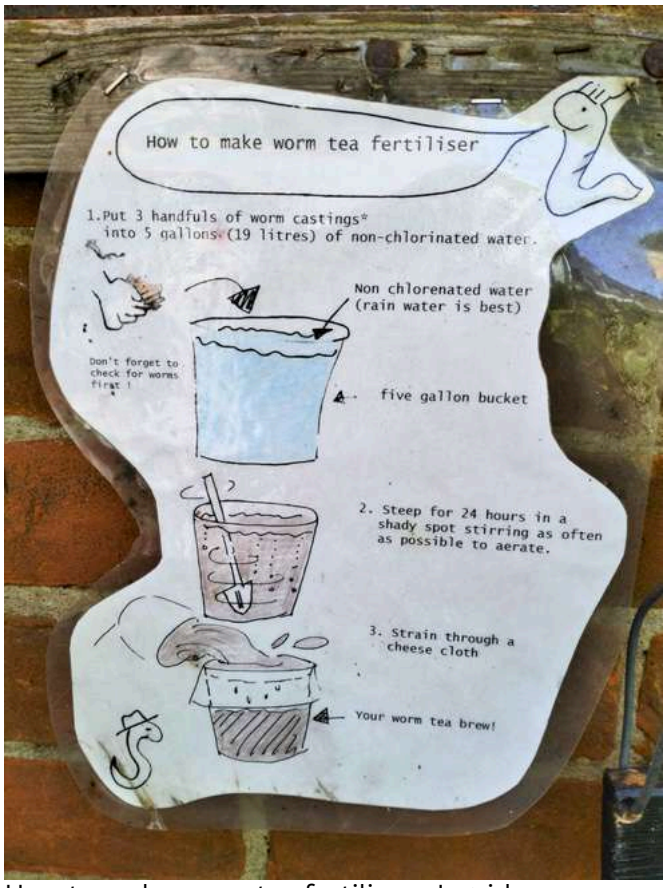
Bees are a great pollinator for our fruit and vegetables – Sandra

Saving money and helping the planet: Tanjina explains the natural process that they use to create (without any expenses) the powerful compost used in the garden - Anna

Tanjina, who struggled with sadness and anxiety after her father passed away, found healing through gardening.
She transformed her small house garden in Tower Hamlets and later shared her passion with the community by creating **Lincoln Garden**. With help from the Linc Centre, she built a community allotment to provide a safe space where locals could connect with nature and support their mental health.
Her work as a mental health advocate was honoured with a mural, not of her portrait, but of an olive tree painted by street artist Carleen De Sözer.
Tanjina founded the Linc Centre's SisterzLinc group, which she manages with another local, where they run sessions on mental health alongside other issues that concern the modern woman.

Cranbrook Community Food Garden

Cranbrook Community Food Garden - Tom


How to make worm tea fertiliser
1.Put 3 handfuls of worm castings*
into 5 gallons (19 litres) of non-chlorinated water.
Non chlorenated water
(rain water is best)
Don't forget to
check for worms
first !
five gallon bucket
2. Steep for 24 hours in a
shady spot stirring as often
as possible to aerate.
3. Strain through a
cheese cloth
Your worm tea brew!
How to make worm tea fertiliser - Ingrid

BERRY LANE E2. ORB
Welcome to BERRY LANE
CREATED BY CRANBROOK GARDEN
MEMBERS & ESTATE RESIDENTS'
PLEASE PICK THE FRUIT
FUNDED by Just FACT- food & CLIMATE TRANSITION
A kind invitation - Anna

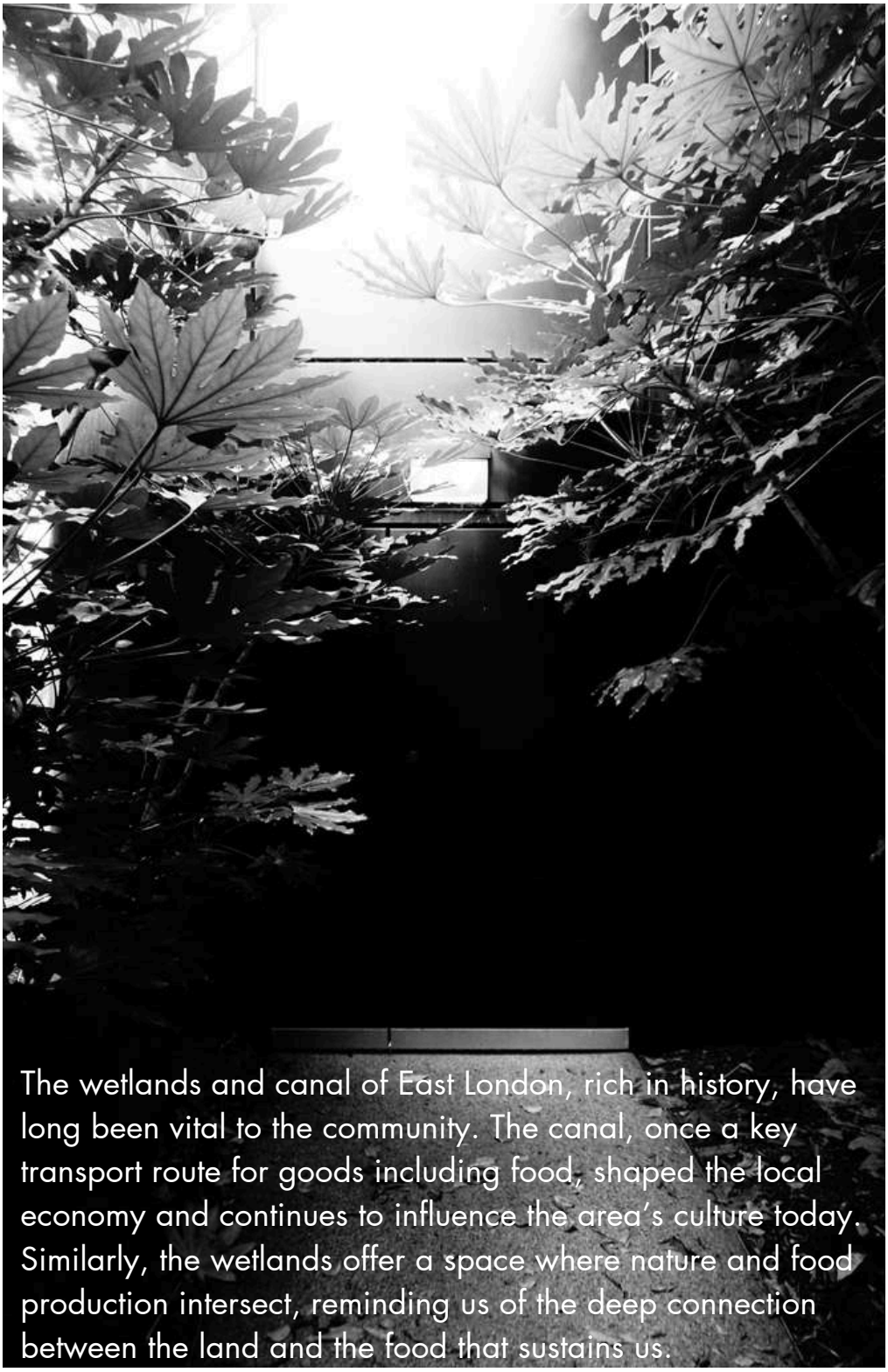
Marilyn

The Sun Shines! - Marian

Connecting Food, Nature, Community, and History

Twenty years ago, I planted two fig trees—one in my garden and the other in my parents'. While mine is yet to bear fruit, my parents' tree flourishes and every year bears an abundant supply of delicious figs. My dad lovingly tends to this tree, and all visitors are treated to bowls of fresh figs to enjoy and take home. This is a picture of my dad with his thriving fig tree, a testament to his green thumb and generous spirit.
- Swapna

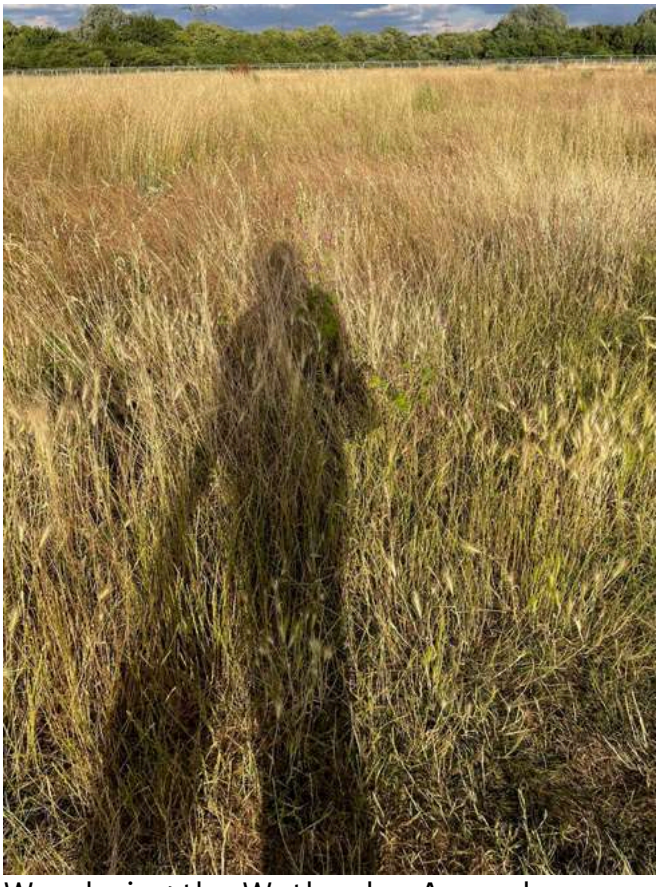
Beans and kodu grown by my mother-in-law, Asiyah, but cooked by me – Shahena



The wetlands and canal of East London, rich in history, have long been vital to the community. The canal, once a key transport route for goods including food, shaped the local economy and continues to influence the area's culture today. Similarly, the wetlands offer a space where nature and food production intersect, reminding us of the deep connection between the land and the food that sustains us.

Secret Garden Door - Len

Reflections on the Canal - Daisy



Wandering the Wetlands - Amanda

Storytelling Circles: Memories of Food

Storytelling Circle at Poplar Union - Pierre

We gathered at Poplar Union to share personal stories of food, connecting over the memories and traditions that shape our lives. Participants brought personal objects to enrich their stories, creating a deeper connection to the past.

During the workshop, we practiced oral history, learning how to record stories using a recorder.

The session culminated with a food-sharing experience, bringing our stories full circle.

Among the stories, Sandra shared her childhood memories of growing up near Victoria Park, including the teddy bear picnic with her mum. Sham told us about her mother, sharing her memories through the Sorta (a betel nut cracker given to her by her mum from Bangladesh). Jan reflected on growing up in a large family and how food was always shared among them.

My mum would take me to Victoria Park for a teddy bears' picnic. We would have jam sandwiches, fairy cakes, and chocolate marshmallow cakes - Sandra

Scan to listen to Sandra's story

My nan's sugar shaker. Memories of visiting her in Leytonstone - Michelle

Studying O-Level Cookery, Mmm
- Jan

Scan to listen to Jan's story

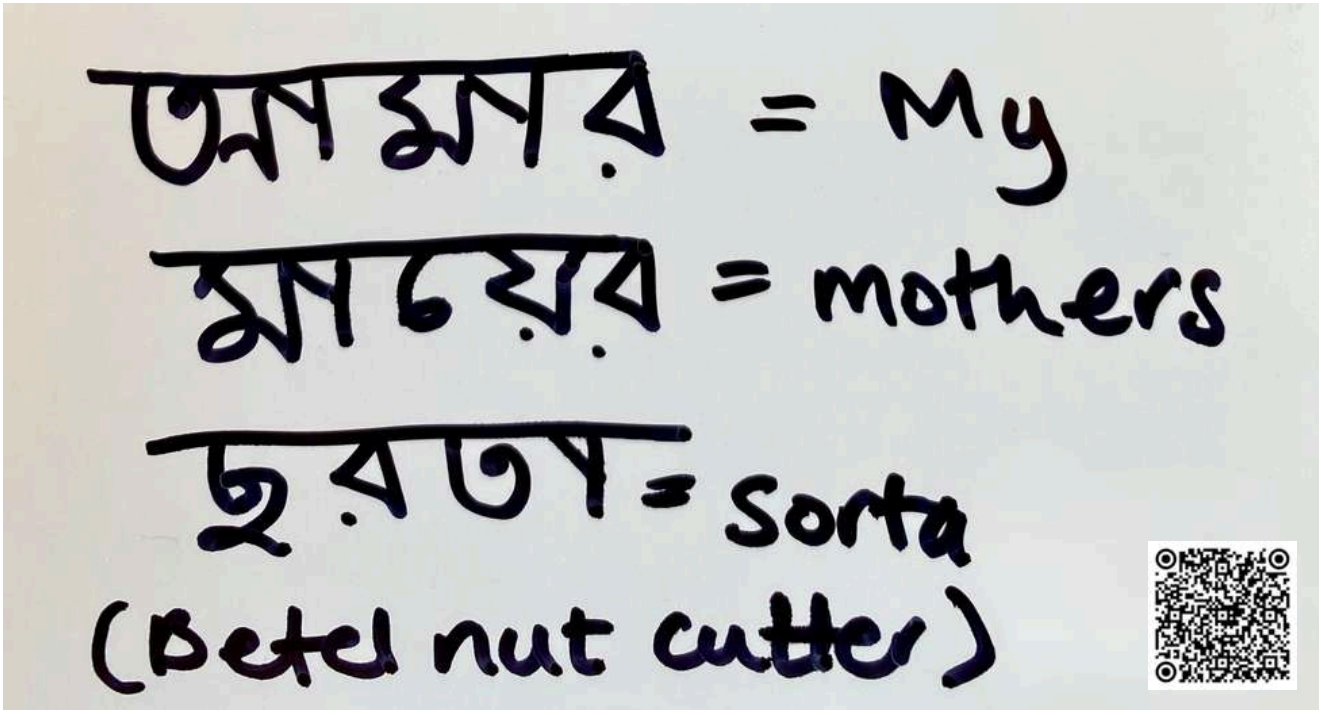
Kaniz Rimu's chicken samosa, cookbook and stories

Nunor Bora (rice flour fritters) - Kaniz. Z

Fruit hedgehogs – Sandra

I have been many times in China working as a researcher on Chinese migration. I bought these chopsticks in 1991 during my first trip there, and I still use them when I enjoy some Chinese food at home - Anna

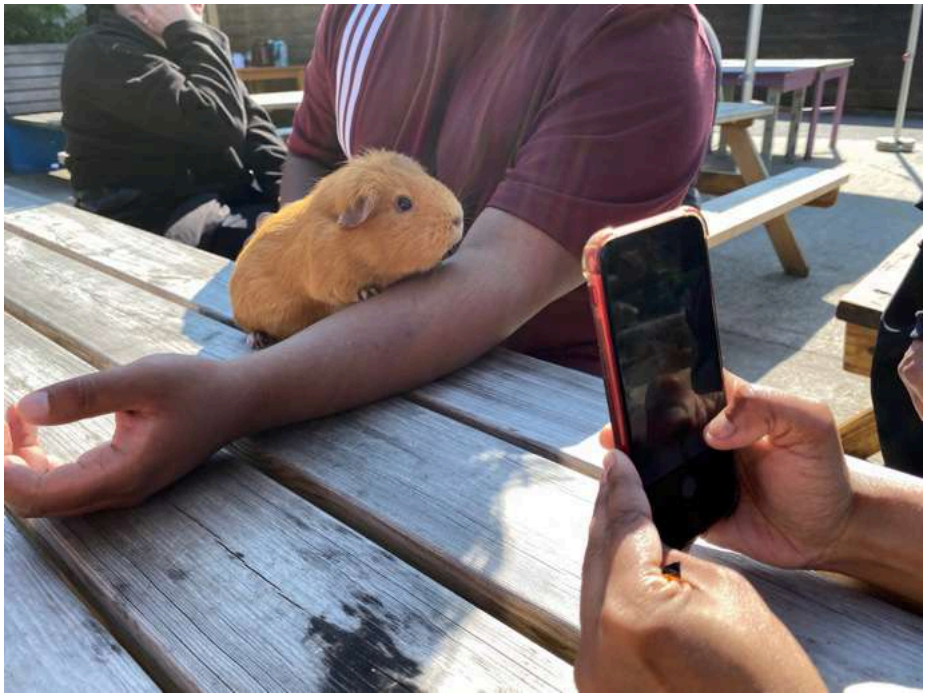
Bengali Culture - Sham



Scan to listen to Sham's story

Photography Workshop: Exploring Nature in Hackney

With families, we explored community food gardens, museums, parks, and farms to celebrate East London's community heritage and resilience.



"The Man with the Hat". Roman Rd. An old Chapel that is now a chemist. Leonie.

Pretty plant x Insaan
and
honey candles!

by Zayd x

Love
Family
Community

A lovely lemon -
Rawahah

Carrots hanging on!

Ihsaan x

Millei & Gabby found a bowl on the treasure hunt!

Flowers at Stepney City Farm

~ Maryam Stokes

Nettles in nature

Sorayya

Wholesome fresh Bread

Abdullah

Siklon - Twist

A wonderful twisty plant that grows under water - Noah + Hana

A happy life in the Rusayyah

A Bird

By Khadija

Flowers in bloom by Enas

The Jewish East End

Photo: Sandy’s Row Synagogue Menorah – Afia

Old and Young - Victoria

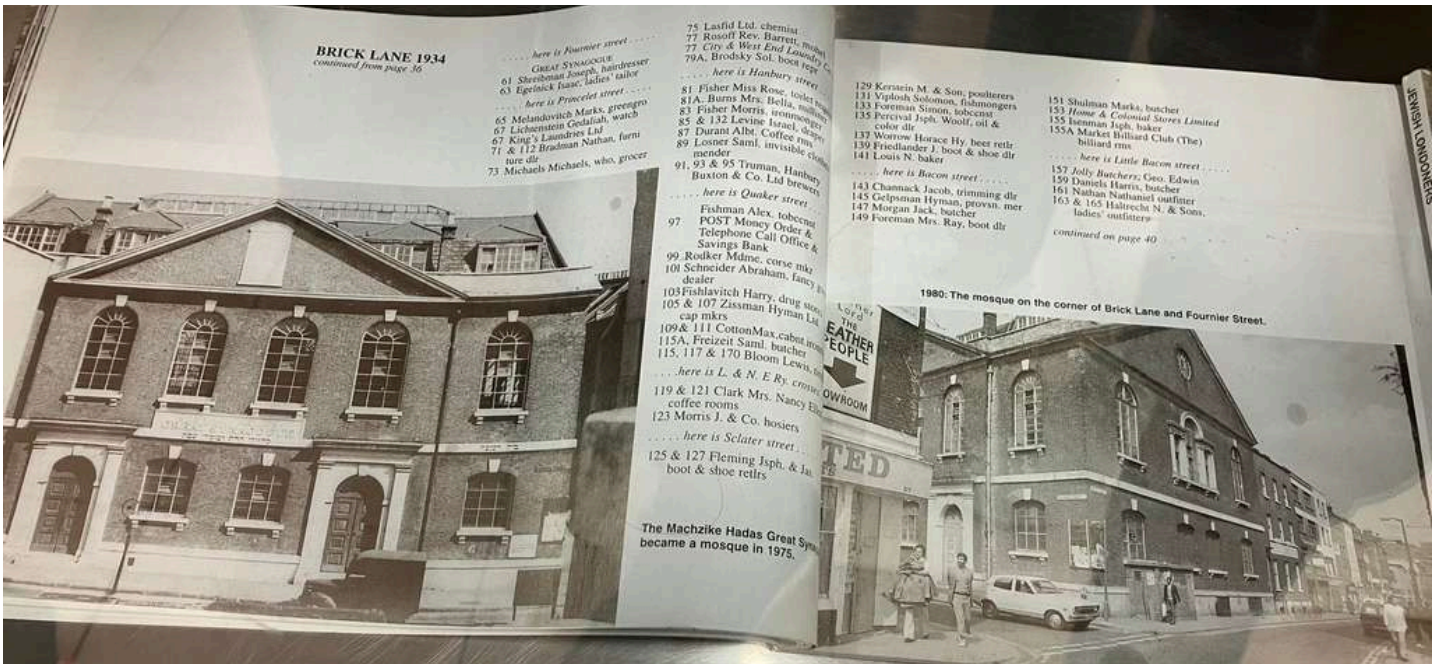
Our journey began at Liverpool Station, where we stood in front of Kindertransport – The Arrival, a poignant monument commemorating the Jewish children who arrived in the UK as part of the Kindertransport just before World War II. Len shared a deeply personal story about a relative who was one of these children, offering a heartfelt connection to the history.

We then explored the Jewish community near Spitalfields and Brick Lane, areas that were home to Britain's largest Jewish population from the late 19th century until the outbreak of World War II. Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe and Russia, arrived seeking refuge and a better life. They settled in overcrowded, dilapidated eighteenth-century houses, creating a vibrant subculture that shaped the area over generations. We visited The Congregation of Jacob Synagogue, guided by Rose, where we spoke with Rabbi David about the area's rich history and its transformation over time.

One participant of Bengali descent shared how she got her first job at the age of 18 in a Jewish grocery store, where she learned about the community's food traditions and developed lasting connections.

Women making salt beef beigel at Britain’s first and best Beigel Shop - Sarah. M

Marian

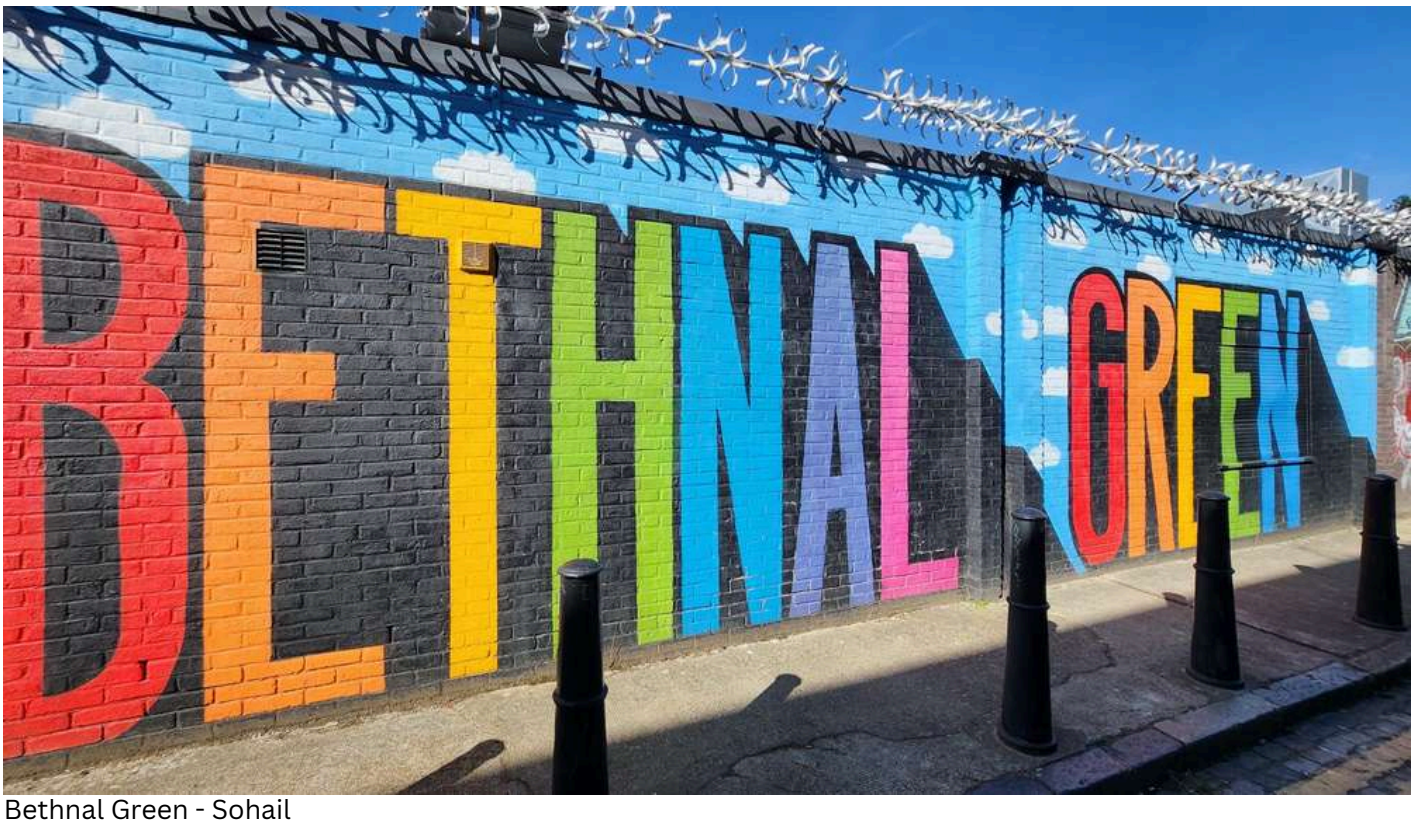

BRICK LANE 1934
1980: The mosque on the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street.
The Machzike Hadas Great Syn
became a mosque in 1975.
JEWISH LONDONERS
Counter at Beigal Bake, founded in 1974. Zoom in to see the Machzike Hadas Synagogue, now a mosque (since 1976) - Nina

Exploring the Jewish East End at Tower Hamlets Archive – Rose

Rabbi David at The Congregation of Jacob Synagogue – Pierre

Tower Hamlets Environment Trust
Daniel Mendoza
Pugilist
1764-1836
English Champion who proudly billed himself as 'Mendoza the Jew', lived here when writing 'The Art of Boxing'.

Homage to "Mendoza the Jew," an 18th-century Jewish boxing champion from East London - Sarah. S



Bethnal Green - Sohail

Leo Epstein - Rose

“I am the last Jewish trader on Brick Lane”- Leo Epstein, Epra Fabrics

My son, his wife, and a Cypriot lady with
her son celebrating Diwali
- Elaine

We are Family - Marian

The Cockney Spirit: Culture and Identity

We began at Paradise Row in Bethnal Green, standing in front of the Mendoza Blue Plaque, which links Jewish heritage to Cockney culture. Mendoza, a Jewish boxer from the area, became a symbol of local pride and resilience, showcasing the connection between the Cockney and Jewish communities in the East End.

Next, we explored the iconic Bow Bells story, central to Cockney identity. If you're born within earshot of the Bow Bells at St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside, you're considered a true Cockney. However, there's debate about whether the bells can truly be heard in all directions, reflecting the pride and sense of community that defines Cockney culture in East London. Food is a huge part of this identity, with traditional Cockney dishes like pie and mash, jellied eels, and the butchers' stalls in the market serving as connections to the area's working-class roots.

We then visited Eastenders Pie & Mash at Chrisp Street Market, where we met the family who runs the business. The father shared that his children would continue the tradition of serving classic Cockney fare. He also recalled his childhood during the Festival of Britain, when Chrisp Street Market Square became the first purpose-built pedestrian shopping area in the UK, featuring the iconic Chrisp Street Clock Tower.

Richard then took us to Victoria Park Bowls Club, which has been a Cockney hub for over 120 years, where the culture of community and socialising remains strong.

Throughout the walk, Rose, a Cockney of Irish descent, connected us with local residents, sharing their stories and offering deeper insight into the Cockney culture that thrives in East London.

Loaf of bread

Butcher's Hook

Fish and Chips

Customer at Maureen's Pie & Mash – Rose

Apples and pears

Eastenders Pie & Mash at Chrisp Street Market – Joanna

EastEnders Pie & Mash - Nina

Rose at the Tower Hamlets Archive holding an old picture of her childhood street

My name is Rose, I was born in 1965 in Nathaniel Buildings, in Flower and Dean Street near Petticoat Lane. My mother was from southern Ireland and Catholic and my dad was from Northern Ireland and a Protestant. This was very unusual back in the day.

As I grew up near Brick Lane, I attended Christchurch primary school. My friends were of Asian heritage, mainly of Bangladeshi background, and I've lived and worked in East London all my life. When I was young, I remember the National Front being down Cheshire Street on a Sunday morning, and at times tension in the area. Despite this, I've always had a sense of belonging in the community.

Growing up, my mother would make traditional Irish dishes, like stews, bacon and cabbage, and soda bread, which reminds me of her and our family in Ireland. She would leave some milk to sour to make the best Soda bread. My dad liked jellied eels, seafood and curry, but mum always stuck with meat and two veg. We always had a full stomach.

They both came to London in the 1950s. My mum came to work and help her sister who was pregnant and we all lived near by. I used to attend Sunday school and remember listening to Jim Reeves and Irish music when I came home. It was always a roast dinner on a Sunday afternoon.

I've always believed in accepting people as they are and growing up with a mixture of cultures, helped shape my views on life. My children are mixed race, my dad was not happy about it, but my mum loved them from the start. She was accepting of everyone, whatever their race, religion or sexual orientation, and I have carried that with me.

F. Cooke, one of the oldest pie and mash shops, closed on Broadway Market and was taken over by an optician, who preserved the façade and some objects, such as a picture of a man holding eels, reflecting the area's changes and gentrification.

Rose

Eels and Opticians - Victoria

This mosaic at Globe Primary School, Bethnal Green, celebrates the tradition of Pearly Kings and Queens, a symbol of working-class culture in East London.
It reflects a rich history of community, charity, and resilience in the area's heritage - Izadora

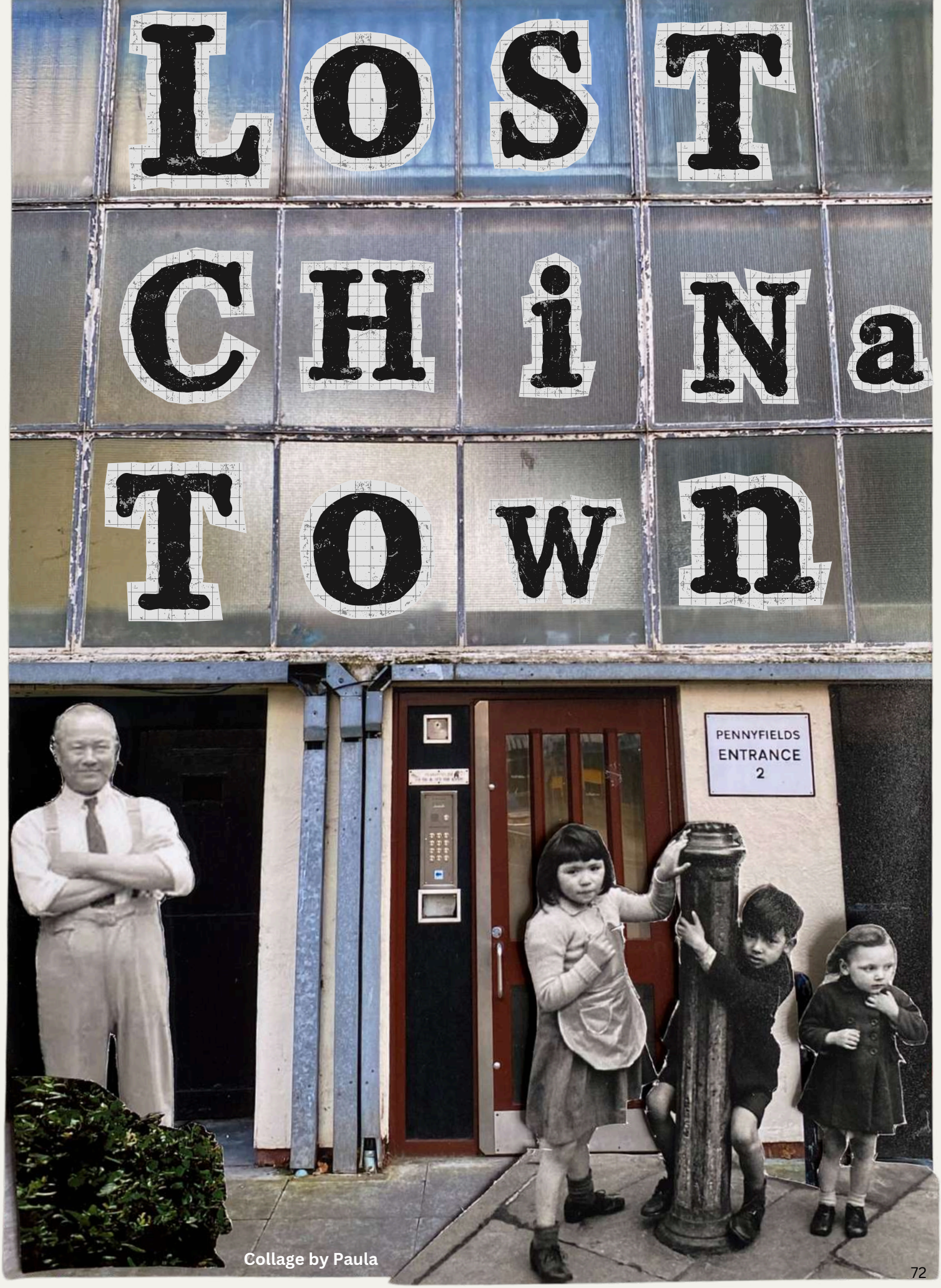
Richard and Father Brian at Victoria Park Bowling Club - Pierre

Hi, my name is Jan. My earliest memory is when we were children, and we were quite a poor family growing up in Essex.
There were nine of us all together, so my mum had to prepare meals that were economical and filling.
My mum used to make a chocolate cake for our birthdays. It was a three-layer cake, and she would make a chocolate mash for the filling, then cover it with royal icing on top with her name and 'Happy Birthday.'
We were allowed one guest because, with such a big family, we could only have one guest at her birthday. It's a very, very special memory, and that's my story.

LOST
AND
FOUND

唐人街
(Tángrénjiē)

LOST CHINA TOWN



Collage by Paula

Collage by Rose – the reflection shows the Chrisp Street Market Clock Tower

In the late 19th century, Chinese sailors working in the East London docks—often paid half the wages of their British counterparts—settled in Limehouse. They opened businesses like restaurants, grocery stores, and laundry services, and many married English women, forming multicultural families that shaped the local community.

However, Chinatown began to decline due to a combination of factors, including the 1929 economic crisis, World War II bombings, and subsequent urban redevelopment. The shifting boundaries of Limehouse also led to parts being absorbed into Poplar. Despite these changes, street names like Canton Street and Ming Street remain as subtle reminders of this once-vibrant enclave.

Our journey began with a visit to the Tower Hamlets Archive to search for images of this lost Chinatown, and we ran a historical photo walk in the Poplar area. As we walked, we spoke to local people, and one lady working at Wings Chinese Cafe under the Chrisp Street Market tower knew about Chinatown and shared her knowledge with us. We also took photos of different streets, some of which still bear Chinese names, such as Ming Street and Pekin Street, while the main street was Pennyfields.

These collages, blending archive images and modern photos, reimagine the stories of Limehouse's first Chinatown.

Chinese foods: memories and present offer - Anna

Collage by Hajia

Shaping the Project:
Creative Workshops and Learning

Skills and Stories Through Archiving, Exhibition Design, Magazine Creation, and Mapping

Exploring Tower Hamlets Archive documents from the 'Feeding the Hamlets' exhibition

The project has been shaped by the community at every step. Initially, the idea came from a workshop we ran with the University of Sussex and WEN for their Food Lives project, where the community expressed a desire to explore food through the lens of history, migration, and the pressing challenges of the cost of living crisis and the environment.

To bring these ideas to life, we worked on building new skills. One key part of the project involved research at the Tower Hamlets Archive, where the team ran a workshop to explore their past work around food and taught participants how to find relevant images. Many participants, like Shahena and Rose—who grew up in Tower Hamlets—found images of their childhood streets. This personal connection brought new meaning to the archives.

We also ran workshops to create the magazine, where participants chose the layout, cover, and developed a narrative. Experts like Shahena, who worked on creating the map, and Paolo, who led the exhibition curation workshop, gave participants the agency to influence the direction of the project. This collaboration ensured the community's stories were central to the work.

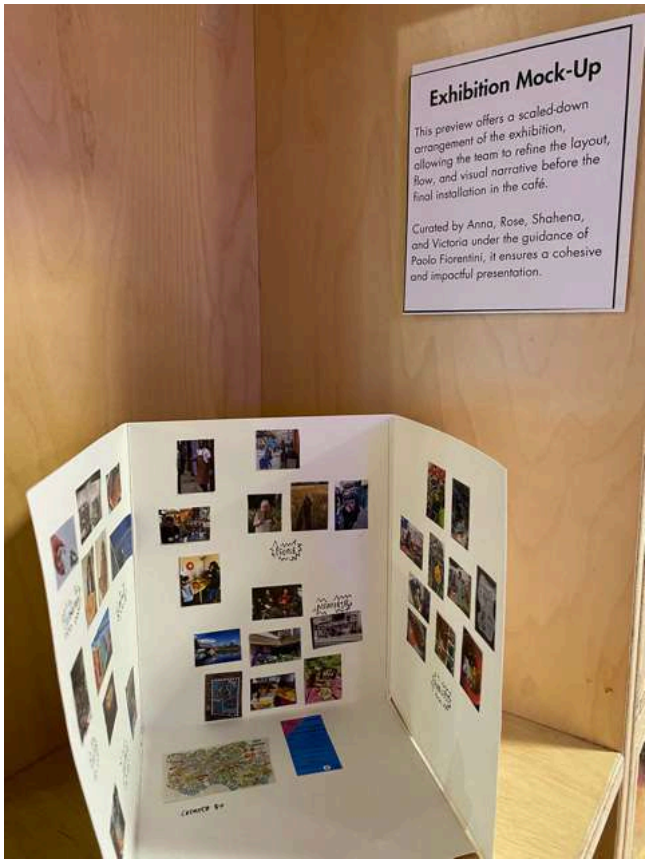
Memories

FIRE EXIT
Switchboard Room

A FAMILY IS WANTED FOR...
A NINE-YEAR-OLD GIRL WITH SPINA BIFIDA WHO IS IN A WHEELCHAIR MOST OF THE TIME.
SHE CAN NO LONGER LIVE WITH HER FAMILY BUT WANTS TO STAY IN TOUCH WITH THEM AND CONTINUE TO ATTEND A MAINSTREAM JUNIOR SCHOOL.
IS YOURS THE FAMILY WHERE SHE COULD GROW UP?
Financial help is available.
If you would like more information please contact
Debbie Leech on 061-980 7111
or
Barbara Prynn on 071-488 1883
Please do not re-shelve items
Instead, leave them out on the desks
Thank you

Magazine Design and Creation Workshop at Poplar Union

Participants curating the exhibition, guided by Paolo’s expertise


Exhibition Mock-Up
This preview offers a scaled-down arrangement of the exhibition, allowing the team to refine the layout, flow, and visual narrative before the final installation in the café.
Curated by Anna, Rose, Shaheena, and Victoria under the guidance of Paolo Fiorentini, it ensures a cohesive and impactful presentation.

Exhibition Layout Mock-up

Paolo Fiorentini, creative director at Poplar Union, is a passionate advocate for using art as a means of healing and community building. Having moved to London from Italy in the 90s, he found solace in art after the loss of his parents, using his craft to cope with grief. “Art is a way to absorb pain and find relief,” he says. Paolo’s work encourages others to explore their own emotional journeys through creativity, connecting with their inner selves and the community around them.
His projects focus on the power of art to foster wellbeing and bring people together in East London’s ever-changing environment.

Open Day Exhibition at Poplar Union

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poplar union

COMMUNITY FUND

MINDFUL PHOTO LAB

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